**WHAT’S AT STAKE: LOW VOTER TURNOUT IN THE SOUTH BRONX**

**By Emily Swanson**

**December 15, 2022**

The Bronx, and especially the South Bronx, consistently lags behind all other parts of the city in terms of voter turnout, despite the voter registration rate of close to 90 percent.

Some community leaders believe the Bronx stands to lose what little political clout it has as a result of low civic engagement. As residents express increasing concerns about public safety, for example, they feel deliberately ignored by both police and elected officials, and some worry that low turnout is the reason why.

For the Nov. 2022 election, [preliminary data from the Board of Elections, as reported by The City](https://projects.thecity.nyc/zeldin-hochul-election-voter-turnout-nyc/), shows that turnout in the Mott Haven/Port Morris area was 19.4 percent. By contrast, turnout in the Upper West Side reached about 56 percent.

Turnout for early voting in the Bronx was even more dismal. According to unofficial [data from the Board of Elections](https://vote.nyc/page/early-voting-check-ins), the Bronx recorded only about percent of the total early votes cast in the city (39,069 out of 432,634). Bronx residents make up about 15 percent. of the city population.

Arline Parks, chairwoman of Bronx Community Board 1 covering Mott Haven, feels crime and quality of life problems have put the district on the verge of “becoming unlivable.” While these concerns dominate board meetings, there are usually few representatives of elected officials or the NYPD present to hear it.

At the October board meeting, NYPD officers publicly committed to sending representatives to every meeting going forward. Board members wanted the opportunity to ask questions and receive updates. However, at the next meeting, no one from the NYPD showed up, and members were furious.

Parks believes this lack of engagement is tied to low voter turnout in the area. She said “the community [is] not voting as a bloc” and when they do vote, they’re “voting for the same folks who got us here.”

**CAMPAIGN FINANCE BOARD TAKES AIM AT UNDERREPRESENTED VOTING AREAS**

The Campaign Finance Board is mandated by the City Charter to not only promote overall voter participation but to specifically make improvements among underrepresented groups.

Omar Suarez, Director of Partnerships and Outreach, listed some factors correlated with low turnout: poverty, percentage of limited English proficiency, lower educational attainment levels, incarceration levels, and even long commute time. Essentially, the richer and whiter a community is, the higher its voter turnout.

The Campaign Finance Board has had the South Bronx on its radar as a population that is neither wealthy nor white. Understanding that registration is high but turnout is low, Suarez said, “A lot of our efforts are focused more on taking voters on the voter file who are registered and trying to contact them closer to election time.”

The Campaign Finance Board used “peer to peer” texting as a means of engaging with South Bronx voters for the primary and general elections of 2022. As Suarez explained it, dozens of volunteers- people, not bots- sent 100,000 to 150,000 messages, and recipients could reply if they had questions. Suarez said it’s important for people to know it’s not just a “blasted” one-way message; rather, “People write back, we have a conversation.”

**SKEPTICAL VOTERS SPEAK OUT**

The Campaign Finance Board is interested in learning why people don’t vote and helping them understand the stakes. Suarez emphasized the importance of voting in local elections- not just for president- but it can be hard to win over those with strong distrust of the process.

Benjamin Beveragio, age 27, lives in Mott Haven and works with people who have developmental disabilities. He said is registered to vote and has voted in the past but did not participate in the Nov. election.

Beveragio explained, “Candidates from both sides are not beneficial to me and my community. The care they have for the people is not genuine. They’re just based on winning a contest. No one ever follows through with their plans. It’s hard to put your trust and faith in it. They will just say anything.”

His friend Rahmel Neal, age 36, chimed in to agree: “That’s just to get our votes, get them in the door. Once they get in the door, it’s the same s—t.”

Adriana Garcia, 35, a lifelong Bronxite and Port Morris resident, echoed the idea of elected officials being out of touch with residents. She feels that once a candidate is in office, “They have all these ideas, but if you’re not investing in what’s here already, people will see you as someone who’s just trying to bring gentrifiers in. We’re not sitting at the table with the same motives.”

Neal and Beveragio expressed similar skepticism about candidates and the importance of their vote, but interestingly, Neal voted in the recent election and his friend did not.

On why Neal voted, he said, “I thought it was gonna be a change, but I see there’s no change. I just vote because they say we’re lazy and we don’t vote. So we try to vote and it’s still the same. So that’s why we feel like our decisions don’t matter. No matter how much we vote, we still lose.”

Leslie Vasquez of South Bronx Unite, an organization that does yearlong outreach to promote voter turnout, echoed that a lack of information is a huge barrier to turnout: “Often times, candidates are not from the South Bronx, and they don’t lobby in the area, so residents don’t know much about who is running,” Vasquez said.

Vasquez believes that most candidates put resources into areas that already have high turnout and it should be the opposite. She said, “Candidates should be asking the community questions, engaging the community to let them know that they are present and will represent them properly.”

Echoing some residents, Vasquez said that candidates “make promises and very often they’re not followed through” on ongoing problems such as poor air quality. Earning the trust of residents seems to be a critical component of increasing turnout and getting results the community wants.

**YOUNG VOTERS STEPPING UP?**

Youth voter turnout is an area of concern. According to the Campaign Finance Board’s [2021-2022 Voter Analysis Report](https://www.nyccfb.info/pdf/2021-2022_VoterAnalysisReport.pdf), in the 2021 general election, voters age 60-79 made up 73.4 percent of the electorate. Turnout was lowest among those age 18-29 at only 11.1 percent.

Hostos Community College student Nashali Gil just turned 20 years old, so she hasn’t been old enough to vote much. Even so, for the last election, Gil didn’t try to find out information on how to vote.

“My family is not political at all, and if they do talk political, it’s jokes,” she said. “So I never took it seriously because they never took it seriously.”

Gil’s situation defies the notion of older people being more active voters. But it’s the opposite in Gil’s family: “It’s my older-generation family that doesn’t pay attention to it,” she said, but her friends and younger relatives are pressuring her to vote. Gil said, “Seeing them do it makes me want to do it.”

As the Campaign Finance Board and local organizations aim to streamline the registration process and improve access for all, it seems that personal connections may make a difference in increasing participation.

Suarez said it is important to engage everyone, including active voters, people who can’t vote, and those who don’t care. When voters are cynical, Suarez said, “It’s a different conversation you have to have with that person,” but it’s still important to try.

“These aren’t just numbers on a spreadsheet, these are people,” he said, and “the whole point of a democracy is for people to have a say.” When people don’t participate and feel left out of the process, residents who can least afford it may have the most to lose.